THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

The Protest in Protestantism

October 25, 1998
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The spirit of reforming Protestantism is a particular cast of mind, a practical attitude, stance or posture...a manner of living reordered and reformed by a radical devotion to God and God's transformative purpose in Jesus Christ; by an imaginative vision of God's all-inclusive reign, commonwealth, or city; and by an active tendency of responsibility to all things in their appropriate interrelations with God and one another.... The spirit of reforming Protestantism consists of a faithfulness at home in the midst of things, marked by a realistic effort to restrain evil and a creatively responsible effort to pursue good. It is an optimistic and generous spirit, uplifted by the sense that, despite sin's corruption, grace abounds.

Douglas F. Ottati
Reforming Protestantism

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THE PROTEST IN PROTESTANISM

October 25, 1998

". . . no one puts new wine into old wineskins. . ." Luke 5:37 (NRSV)

Startle us, O God, with your truth. And assure us that we are free and obliged in your liberating love to re-examine all our traditions—religious, political, personal—to hold the entirety of our lives up to the light of your unconditional love. Startle us, O God, with the amazing news that we are loved and forgiven and that because of that amazing grace, free to be your joyful and faithful people. Startle us with that truth, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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In her wonderful memoir *Wait Till Next Year*, Doris Kearns Goodwin writes about her childhood in the fifties on Long Island, her devotion to her church, which was Roman Catholic, and her passionate love for the Brooklyn Dodgers—a great baseball franchise which dominated the National League in the 40s and 50s. Every year, it seemed, the Dodgers would lose to the Yankees in the World Series, thus the title of the book, *Wait Till Next Year*, a poignant sentiment which means something very different to Cubs fans, who don't have the privilege of losing to anyone in the World Series—and haven't since 1945. But I digress.

Kearns Goodwin talks about an incident that brought her dual devotion—to baseball and to church—into conflict.

> "So rich were the traditions and the liturgy of my church that I could not imagine being anything other than Catholic. Though there were Jews and Protestants on our block - I knew almost nothing about these other religions. We were taught only that these people were non-Catholics and that we should not read their literature or inquire about their beliefs. Furthermore, it was, we thought, a grievous sin for us to set foot in one of their churches or synagogues.
> It was this last admonition that produced my first spiritual crisis. In early February 1950, our newspaper, the *Long Island News and Owl*, reported that Dodger catcher Roy Campanella was coming to Rockville Centre. He planned to speak at a benefit for the local black church, then under construction, the Shiloh Baptist Church. The program was to be held in the Church of the Ascension, an Episcopal church one block from St. Agnes.
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> I couldn't wait to tell my father that his favorite player would be coming to our town, so he would get tickets and take me with him. I begged my mother to take me to the train station so I could tell my father the dramatic news as soon as he stepped off the platform. As our car passed St. Agnes on the way to the station, however, it dawned on me that Campanella was scheduled to speak in the *Episcopal* church. 'Oh, no.!' I said, 'It can't be.' 'What?' my mother asked. Close to tears, I announced that there was no hope of my going after all, since I was forbidden to set foot in the Episcopal church. Campanella was coming to my town and I could not even go to

see him. To my surprise, my mother simply said, 'Well, let's see, let's wait and talk to Daddy.' When I explained the dilemma to my father, he said that he understood the church's prohibition against participating in the service of another church, but he didn't really believe it extended to attending a lecture by a baseball player in the parish hall. He was certain it would be proper for us to go and would get the tickets the following day.

Reassured, I put my qualms aside until the big night arrived and the moment came to cross the threshold of the white clapboard church. A sudden terror took possession of me, and my knees began to tremble. Fearing that we would be struck dead in retaliation for our act of defiance, I squeezed my body against my father and let his momentum carry me past the door, through the sanctuary, and into the parish hall. At first, I tried to keep my eyes on the ground, but I soon found myself surveying the simple altar, small windows, and plain wooden pews, so much less ornate and imposing than ours. A podium had been set up in the hall with about 150 folding chairs, and we were lucky enough to find seats in the second row."

Campanella spoke, and Doris Kearns Goodwin shook his hand afterward.

"The warmth of his broad smile was all I needed to know that this was a night I would never forget.

My earlier fear returned, however, as I climbed into bed that night. The warnings of the nuns tumbled through my head, convincing me that I had traded the life of my everlasting soul for the joy of one glorious night when I held Roy Campanella's strong hand in a forbidden church. Jumping out of bed, I got down on my knees and repeated every prayer I could remember, in the hope that each would wipe away part of the stain that the Episcopal church had left on my soul."

Catholics and Protestants have come a long way in my lifetime. It wasn't so very long ago, however, as Doris Kearns Goodwin reminds us, that we weren't sure that they were Christians, and they weren't sure about us. I recall childhood Catholic friends who would cross the street rather than walk in front of a Protestant church, and I recall serious Sunday School class lessons on the topic of not dating Catholics in order to avoid the very difficult if somewhat remote possibility of getting involved in what we used to call "mixed marriages."

I recall a famous incident when the Pope was planning to visit Northern Ireland, and the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Ireland passed a resolution that if the Pope came, they weren't going to welcome him, and if they were invited to any public ceremonies they weren't going to accept the invitation.

Two years ago, when it was my privilege to serve as Moderator of our General Assembly, I was received cordially and warmly by Cardinal Edward Cassaday, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. I had the opportunity to speak with him and two other Vatican officials in their ecumenical office for two hours, and later we were special guests at a Papal audience to extend the greetings of the people of the Presbyterian Church (USA) to Pope John Paul II and to receive his very warm greetings and blessing. It

was, in the context of our history and my personal history, an amazing moment, one that I shall not forget.

In the meeting at the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, we talked about the state of ecumenism in the United States, and I was able to describe the warm and open relationships between Holy Name Cathedral and Fourth Presbyterian Church; that we collaborate in building housing for the poor, in ecumenical Thanksgiving worship experiences, that the pastor, Father Bob McLaughlin, is a good friend who has preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church, that Cardinal Joseph Bernardin had presided in the pulpit at Fourth Presbyterian Church on two occasions, and that Archbishop Francis George had accepted our invitation to spend a morning with us and to preach. I told him that a fair number of Catholics worship with us, and a fair number of Presbyterians attend mass at Holy Name and, so far as I know, probably receive Eucharist and that, so far as I know, the roof has not fallen on either structure.

I told him that, so far as I could see, Catholic and Protestant people are far more open to one another than the leadership of the churches, that people are ahead of us and don't understand, frankly, the remnants of an older exclusivism and are occasionally impatient with our inability to get together.

And then, because I probably wasn't going to be coming back that way, I decided to take a chance. I told the Cardinal that, while Presbyterian Protestants, at least, welcome Roman Catholics and all who confess Christ as Lord and Savior to the sacrament of communion, we note with sadness that we are not fully welcome at the Roman Eucharist. I told him about being part of the ecumenical delegation attending Cardinal Bernardin's funeral and how gratified I was for that privilege and how I admired and respected Joseph Bernardin and how he went out of his way to affirm his friendship with us, and then, how disappointed I was when it came time for communion at his funeral to know that I was not welcome. So I told him that while we are grateful for the progress we have made, we pray for the day when we will be as welcome at Eucharist as our Catholic brothers and sisters are at our communion table.

It is Reformation Sunday, an occasion in the past for belligerent Protestant preachers to pound the pulpit and let everybody know what is wrong with Rome. Thankfully, we have grown beyond that, and we can see, with a little clarity, at least, that we all are trying to be faithful to Jesus Christ, that we agree far more than we disagree, that our similarities far outweigh our differences, and that in the long run there is probably no Catholic or Protestant corner in heaven.

It is an occasion to think about our tradition in light of where we—all of us, Catholics and Protestants—find ourselves today.

A good place to begin that process is with this morning's text, an incident near the beginning of the story in which Jesus comes in conflict with religious authority and tradition. It is a good story for this day. Almost as soon as he begins his public ministry of teaching and healing, Jesus runs afoul of religious tradition. He gets himself in trouble for breaking with both religious custom and religious law by healing on the Sabbath, associating with unclean people, not paying attention to the purity and dietary rules, and

for not fasting. The disciples of John the Baptist, in the meantime, are great fasters, always fasting, publicly fasting, letting everybody know they are fasting. Jesus and his friends don't look like they are serious in comparison to John's disciples. And so, religious leaders, the Pharisees, confront him and ask, essentially, why he is ignoring the traditions and laws of his religion, why he feels he can disregard the way we always do things around here. His response is provocative and brilliant. "You don't fast while the bridegroom is here." And besides, you don't repair an old garment with a new patch, or put new wine in old wineskins.

These were homey allusions. A new patch will shrink and tear a larger hole. New wine is not fully fermented. If it is placed in old, inelastic skins, it will burst the container. I like to think that maybe this had happened in every household and that the children thought it was pretty funny when Dad took a wineskin down from the hook to take a drink, and it exploded!

In any event, new wine will not be contained in old wineskins. It won't work. Luke adds an intriguing sentence at the end, "No one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says 'the old is good!'"

That is, you must have new wine or the supply will be gone. And new wine must have its own appropriate containers, but old wine is really good. That is, it is not an attack on the tradition so much as an affirmation that there must be new structures, new customs, a new ethos, if the tradition is to survive.

I love something T.S. Eliot once said about tradition, "Tradition is not something you inherit—if you want tradition you must obtain it with great labor. You must obtain it with intellectual toil, existential engagement, contestation and interrogation." (See "Cornell West," *Criterion*, University of Chicago Divinity School, Spring/Summer 1994).

Our tradition has at its heart the idea of protest. We were born in an act of protest against church authority, but it also quickly became a protest against political and social authoritarianism. Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall says that Protestantism is based on an ethic of resistance and an ethic of responsibility.

Protestantism, says Hall, "historically and classically understood, implies a polemic against all pretensions of finality of doctrine and understanding." And ". . . our protest," he says, "is not only a protest against doctrine put forward as first, it is also a protest against power masquerading as ultimate." (*Confessing the Faith*)

The earliest Christian creed is the simple affirmation that Jesus Christ is Lord. When the early Christians said it, it was a protest against a political system that said the emperor was Lord. "Jesus Christ is Lord," meant, "Caesar is not." Dictators have always understood that about us. Hitler knew exactly what that meant when the Confessing Church said the same thing and turned the power of the SS against the church. Joseph Stalin knew exactly the threat to his Communist dictatorship posed by a free church claiming Jesus Christ as Lord.

But we also embrace an ethic of responsibility for the world God so loves. Our vocation, our calling, we have always believed, is a worldly one. One of our most precious ideas is

the priesthood of all believers, which does not mean that we don't need a priest to put us in touch with God. What it means is that God calls each of us, clergy and laity, and that no calling is higher than any other, that doctor, lawyer, homemaker, shoemaker, police, social worker, fund raiser, broker, truck driver, all have a vocation to do the business of God's creation to God's glory and honor.

The "protest," in Protestantism is against "pretensions of finality." In a recent lecture, Cynthia Campbell talked about the Reformed tradition as a way of being Christian that realizes that reformation is a permanent necessity for the church, not a one-time event that happened 450 years ago.

The way Cynthia puts it, "None of us, not even church, will ever get it right. Our creeds, our institutions are all open to question. When we think we have it right, heads start to roll."

The Reformed tradition, Cynthia says, knows that only God is God. We are not. The only ultimate is God. The only perfection is God's perfect love. Everything human is limited, faulty—sinful, if you will. Everything human is open to critique, questioning, and reformation, particularly human religious institutions, their structures, even their pronouncements and creeds. There is a sense of self-limitation about us. We are willing to subject our best institutions to criticism because we know they are not perfect. We know, furthermore, that when our institutions, our ideas, our political or economic systems claim to be absolute, ultimate and perfect, heads will roll.

The great theologian Paul Tillich called it the Protestant principle: God alone is Lord. Nothing else is ultimate; everything else requires reformation.

If you conclude that your truth is the only ultimate truth and your institutions reflect that truth in a perfect way, you can do some remarkably presumptuous things. Liturgical Press, a Catholic publishing house in Minnesota, recently destroyed 1300 books at the direction of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, head of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith. The book, *Women at the Altar*, was written by a nun, Sister Lavinia Byrne, and it argues for the ordination of women.

Destroying books offends something deep in the Protestant soul. But so, frankly, does the often successful attempt of the Christian Right, which is almost exclusively Protestant, to dictate what literature will be available in public libraries and what children can and cannot read in public schools. Frankly, I worry a lot more about Pat Robertson and the Christian Coalition than I do about Cardinal Ratzinger. Robertson, unlike Ratzinger, has political influence and direct access to one of our parties, and candidates seek and increasingly believe they need his endorsement.

Robertson calls for the dismantling of the Federal Reserve System, says that the Constitutional separation of church and state is a myth, calls for abolishing Halloween as a left wing, satanic plot, recently suggested that God would send terrorist bombs or tornadoes to the City of Orlando because of a gay pride celebration, and once wrote that feminism not only encourages lesbianism, but also child killing and witchcraft. [*The Wall Street Journal*, August 20, 1998, *The Religious Right is About Politics, Not Faith*]

The threat to the Protestant principle I worry about is not Roman imperialism, but a mainly Protestant Right, which claims that to disagree with their positions politically is to be anti-faith, anti-Christian—an intellectual position that claims that there is only one Christian position on abortion, for instance, and that all who disagree with that position are not just wrong, but are outside the boundaries of faithfulness and are murderers. When you are absolutely certain that your position is God's position, it is easy to escalate the rhetoric of disagreement to a level of violence and threat. If you call a good physician who happens to include abortion in his practices a murderer loudly and insistently enough, you cannot claim to be surprised when someone decides to be God's prosecutor and executioner, as happened in a suburb of Buffalo last Friday night.

It is a precious Reformed tradition to look with studied skepticism at absolute truth claims, whatever the source. Reformed thinking protests the claim to absolute truth of left and right: Communism and Fascism, as well as institutional absolutism of Rome and the ideological absolutism of our own Presbyterian right wing. Our most precious conviction is that God alone is God. God alone is Lord of the human conscience. Therefore, we are wonderfully free, intellectually, and ultimately, politically.

We come to our protest from a very gentle place—our most precious theology: the theology of grace . . .the amazing grace of God that utterly captivated an Augustinian monk by the name of Martin Luther in the 16th Century—the grace that finally penetrated his determined pursuit of his own salvation with the truth that he was saved by God's grace, not by his own efforts, not by the church, and therefore he was free to put aside the effort to save his own soul and live in humble, joyful gratitude for the gift already given to him. It captivated his soul and transformed him into a strong, fearless advocate and teacher and prophet and leader.

It is the heart of this faith of ours. Grace—the new vision that always bursts old, rigid containers.

It captivates my soul, too, every time I ponder it: the great mystery that God loves me and you, not because we are particularly lovable, but sometimes in spite of who we are; that God loves you and me not because our moral perfection has made us deserving of God's love, but in spite of our moral failings.

I'm captivated by the old, but somehow always new idea that God alone is God, that I belong to God, that the purpose of my life is to glorify God and enjoy God forever.

And, I'm captivated by the old-but somehow always new idea that because of God's grace I'm free to trust God with my ultimate destination, free to live my life fully and as courageously as I can, gratefully, joyfully.

That is what it means to be a Protestant. It is our oldest, most precious tradition. And, as the Gospel lesson reminds us, "No one after drinking old wine desires new, but says, 'The old is good.'"

Amen.